

## SPHEIR Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

# AQHEd Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone

AQHEd-SL is part of the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR). The project brought together higher education institutions (HEIs), policymakers, and employers across Sierra Leone to work together towards improving graduate qualifications and employability. The focus of the project has been to improve HEIs' capacity to offer quality education through outcome-based, student-centred learning that meets quality standards at the institutional and national level.

Funded by the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the SPHEIR programme supports "transformational change" in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. AQHEd-SL is one of eight collaborative partnerships selected by SPHEIR to implement its plan to introduce high-quality outcome-based education tailored to labour market demand through four key activities:

### •Curriculum reform & stakeholder engagement

*Substantive curriculum reform to move towards relevant, outcome-based curricula and learner-centred pedagogy.* Employers and other stakeholders were actively involved in curriculum reform and lecturers were trained in innovative pedagogy, critical thinking, and gender and diversity awareness to improve curriculum relevance and delivery.

### •Quality assurance (QA)

*Establishing quality management systems at the national and institutional levels to ensure sustainability of reforms and alignment with international standards.* A National Qualification Framework (NQF) was implemented and linked to institutional-level QA systems. QA staff were appointed and trained through a newly-established Postgraduate Programme in Quality Assurance, developed to create a common standard across Sierra Leone.

### •Templates and standardisation

*A series of standardised manuals and templates on curriculum reform, internal quality assurance, and pedagogy.* Closely associated with training, the manuals represent a significant step for long-term impact as they were endorsed by the Sierra Leonean Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and used by the TEC to re-align its own checklists. This official acceptance of the manuals facilitates a spread of these new standards across HEIs in Sierra Leone.

### •Training

*A core transversal theme across all activities.* Capacity development covered quality assurance, pedagogy, critical thinking as well as and gender, diversity and inclusion. Trainings had international and community support and were conducted throughout the lifetime of the project. In the later stages, workshops shifted to a "train the trainers" approach to maximise reach, potential impact, and leverage multiplier effects.

## Key facts

<b>Theme</b>	Higher Education
<b>Country</b>	Sierra Leone
<b>Funder</b>	UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)
<b>Fund manager</b>	British Council, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Universities UK and Ireland (UUKI)
<b>Lead partner</b>	University of Sierra Leone (USL)
<b>Grant agreement holder</b>	Kings College London (KCL)
<b>Grant amount</b>	GBP 3.8 million
<b>Project duration</b>	3.5 years
<b>Timeframe</b>	2018-2021



▲ University of Makeni students sharing positive feedback on the new student-centred teaching



▲ University of Makeni students at the Management Career Fair



▲ Lecturer at train-the-trainer pedagogy workshop practicing interactive facilitation

## Highlights

**90**  
organisations

### Stakeholder engagement

Academia, industry, employers, and policymakers across disciplines and sectors.

**295**  
modules

### Curriculum reform

Across eight degree programmes, updating and standardising content to respond to employer needs.

**475**  
lecturers & staff

### Capacity development

Nationwide training in learner-centred teaching, critical thinking, and Gender, Diversity and Inclusion.

**34**

QA officers  
trained

### National Quality diploma

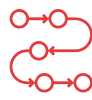
Partner universities and the Tertiary Education Commission appointed and trained QA officers to ensure sustainability of the QA system.



External quality  
assurance

### National qualifications framework

Establishing common regulatory frameworks wholly developed by HEI partners to ensure strong buy-in and national validation.



Template  
development

### Standardisation

Standardised curriculum and pedagogy to promote mobility and maintain quality through continuous improvement.



Common  
platform

### Knowledge exchange

HEIs, employers, industry, and policymakers came together for the first time resulting in strong connections and shared vision.



National education  
bodies

### High-level political support

Ministry of Technical and Higher Education, Tertiary Education Commission, Conference of Vice Chancellors and Principals guarantee sustainability of reforms.

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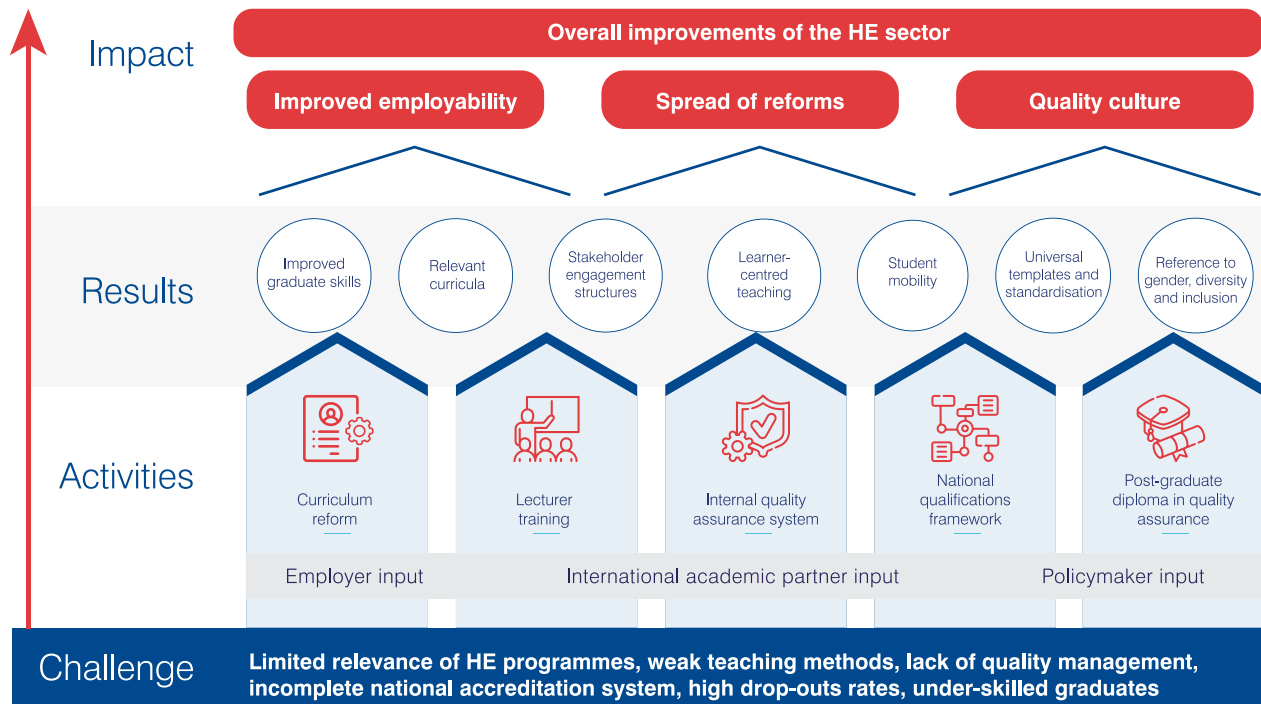
SPHEIR was a great platform to bring academics together and create a common understanding, vision, exchange knowledge, connect with stakeholders and built capacity. This is the first time in the history of Sierra Leone that we are together in one room.

*University Quality Assurance Officer*

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# How AQHEd achieved its goal



## Learning from success

AQHEd-SL was a remarkable success. Most of the originally intended outcomes were achieved while also realising the Theory of Change. What made it work?

- **Sierra Leonean-led**

The University of Sierra Leone led across national and international partners, which resulted in clear local ownership and high capacity-development effects.

- **Entrepreneurial actors**

A group of political entrepreneurs were vital in shouldering the cost of forming a dedicated and stable coalition for the project application and maintaining the commitment over time.

- **Catalysing effect**

The time was ripe for reform and change. The project acted as a catalyst to respond to concrete needs and pre-existing ideas, i.e. SPHEIR created a window of opportunity.

“ AQHEd-SL was a project that was fully Sierra Leonean owned. The project protagonists brought key stakeholders together in a highly dedicated group that was willing to contribute to the success of the project above and beyond personal advantages.

*External Evaluators*



▲ Employers and academics enjoying an ice breaker challenge at the Health Networking Event

- **Common vision**

The project benefited enormously from the coordination platforms, which resulted in solid stakeholder relationships and a shared vision and identity.

- **Systemic impact and sustainability**

Standardisation supported by templates (e.g. Quality Assurance Manuals, Curriculum Review Handbook) and endorsed by policymakers were an excellent tool for ensuring sustainable change and systemic impact.

- **Project management**

Complex projects need strong project management and communication. AQHEd-SL demonstrated the capacity to check and adjust, recovering from a challenging beginning to catch up and end well. Frontloading project and financial management capacity development can help to speed-up the start-up phase.

# Opportunities for partnership

## Strengthening research capacity

Quality teaching is informed by research, therefore targeted funding would produce knowledge relevant to issues in Sierra Leone. Funding could include research methodology, publication strategies and support for grant writing.

## Equipment and tools

Access to physical teaching tools and equipment is essential for graduates to develop relevant skills to improve employability. Provisions can include computer hardware/software, and lab equipment/material.

## Localisation of textbooks

This growing movement overhauls textbooks and teaching materials to respond to local needs, improving the quality and relevance of higher education, which in turn provides a useful skillset to graduates.

## Gender, diversity and inclusion

AQHEd-SL has broken new ground in HE and laid solid foundations, yet much remains to be done to achieve systemic cultural change.

## Lateral diffusion

Expand quality system, capacity development, and curriculum reform beyond the participating programmes within a disciplinary field (e.g. from the pharmacy programmes to medical sciences, medical sciences and nursing).

## HE/TVET National Qualification Frameworks

Uniting the two National Qualification Frameworks for Higher Education and TVET would generate national and international student mobility and result in significant impact.

## Institutional partners



SLIE



## 8 Higher education institutions in Sierra Leone

- University of Sierra Leone, Fourah Bay College
- University of Sierra Leone, College of Medicine & Allied Health Sciences
- Njala University
- University of Makeni
- Freetown Polytechnic
- Milton Margai Technical University
- Eastern Technical University
- Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology

## 3 Non-higher education institutions in Sierra Leone

- Tertiary Education Commission (TEC)
- Sierra Leone Institute of Engineers (SLIE)
- The 50/50 Group

## 3 International partners

- King's College London (project management)
- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)
- International Network for Advancing Science and Policy (INASP)

## Contact Us

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More about SPHEIR  
<https://www.spheir.org.uk>

More about AQHEd-SL  
AQHEd blog: <https://aqhedsl.medium.com>  
Zenodo repository: <https://bit.ly/3kLbW97>

Summative evaluation and factsheet by  
[www.paeradigms.org](http://www.paeradigms.org)

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